

Field Manager Report

December 2022

Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) including Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA) and the UFO portion of Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (D-ENCA)

Note to RAC Members: Topics below are labeled either “**Status Update**” or “**New Update**” to help members identify what has changed from the previous report. We will request feedback at the December RAC on how we can further make these reports useful to you.

Grazing and Natural Resources

Grazing Permit Renewals – Status Update

The UFO is continuing to implement a five-year strategic plan to fully process grazing permits. The effort includes an assessment of land health conditions to determine whether Colorado Standards for Public Land Health are met and requires regular communications with applicants (permittees). Grazing permits are being processed using categorical exclusions (CXs) or Environmental Assessments (EAs). Complex and high visibility permits currently being evaluated include the following:

Crawford Area Allotments

The UFO is analyzing alternatives in EAs for grazing permits renewals on the Green Mountain, Grizzly Gulch, Iron Springs, Poison Spring, and Gould Reservoir allotments within the Crawford area. Permittees collaborated with the UFO developing their applications for renewal. These applications will be analyzed as proposed actions in the EAs. The UFO plans to post these EAs for public comment this winter. Associated land health assessment amendments for these allotments received public input in the spring and will be finalized.

Mailbox Park Allotment

The UFO released an EA to issue a sheep grazing permit on the Mailbox Park allotment for public comment from September 29 through October 30. The UFO is currently evaluating received comments.

Cushman Allotment

UFO received an appeal in 2021 on a transfer of preference decision for the Cushman allotment from the Rocky Mountain Bighorn Society (RMBS) over bighorn and domestic sheep concerns. The US Department of the Interior Office of Hearings and Appeal (OHA) issued an order in August 2022 vacating the UFO’s decision. UFO is currently working with the base property owner and grazing permit applicant regarding the next steps, including planning for analysis of a grazing permit application on the Cushman allotment. Land health conditions are currently being assessed in preparation for an EA.

Cactus Park & Lower Escalante Allotments

UFO is currently working on a grazing permit renewal in bighorn habitat in the Cactus Park and Lower Escalante allotments in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. The project is also being developed in collaboration with the National Wildlife Federation, including installation of water catchments in support of livestock conversion from sheep to cattle.

Recreation

Electric Hills Trail System – Status Update



The Montrose Uncompahgre Trails (MUT) chapter of COPMOBA was awarded a \$242,000 trail construction and resource protection grant last winter from CPW for the Electric Hills trail system project. The trails group wasted no time in getting to work on construction of new, purpose-built singletrack trails. The grant is helping the group and BLM complete the planned 17 miles of trails in the system, as well as some associated resource protection work. UFO, CPW, MUT and community partners have been working together on this project for several years, and we are all pleased to see it coming to fruition. MUT expects to have the trail system completed in the summer of 2023. *Image from the MUT Facebook page*

Dumping and Trash on Public Lands

In 2022 staff investigated, logged (through an application called Survey 1-2-3) and addressed over 25 dumpsites (including several abandoned campers). BLM staff cleaned up and disposed of:

- 206 tires
- 10 mattresses
- 940 pounds of e-waste
- 48,420 pounds of trash (24.21 tons!)
- 19,422 pounds of metal taken to Recla Metals for recycling

We will continue this work in 2023. BLM's Southwest District has hired a part-time position to help develop an anti-dumping campaign strategy. Individual RAC members have discussed with us options for engaging in this effort; we would appreciate further RAC engagement on this issue, which affects BLM managed lands statewide.

Jumbo Mountain Travel Management Planning – Status Update

We are currently working on developing the proposed action for the environmental assessment. We hope to go back out for public comment on the proposed action and alternatives in late-winter/early-spring 2023.

Lands and Minerals

Department of Energy Partnership – Status Update

Coordination with U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Defense Related Uranium Mitigation (DRUM) program, Bat Conservation International (BCI) and Colorado Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety (CDRMS) continues for the closure of abandoned mines in the West End area of the field office. 46 mine features have been safely closed in FY22 and an additional 35 were closed in FY23. 20 more mine features are proposed for closure over the coming year. A term archeologist was onboarded in November to coordinate review and consultation which will help increase the numbers of safety closures over the next four years.

Durita Land Withdrawal – Status Update

The BLM is awaiting publication of a Federal Register Notice requesting permanent withdrawal of about 70 acres of BLM-managed land to DOE's Office of Legacy Management (LM) for public safety reasons. Located approximately 2.5 miles west of Naturita, Colorado, the Durita Site was the location of a uranium mill that operated in the late 1970s and is regulated under Title II of the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act of 1978 [42 U.S.C. § 7901]. DOE is proposing the withdrawal to limit accessibility of the subsurface to prevent potential contact with remaining contaminants from the extraction operations, protect engineered site features that are directly adjacent to and extend onto the surface of the subject parcel, periodically inspect the site to ascertain the condition of the disposal cell and decommissioned leach tanks and other control features (e.g., fencing and signage), and simplify federal management of the site. After publication of the Notice, BLM will have two years to complete the NEPA.

Thompson Divide Withdrawal – New Notice

In a Federal Register Notice published October 17, 2022, the Secretary of the Interior, on behalf of the BLM and US Forest Service, proposed to withdraw approximately 224,793.73 acres, including approximately 200,518.28 acres of National Forest System lands, approximately 15,464.99 acres of BLM- managed public lands, and approximately 8,810.46 acres of reserved Federal mineral interest, from all forms of entry, appropriation, and disposal under the public land laws; location, entry, and patent under the mining laws; and operation of the mineral leasing, mineral materials, and geothermal leasing laws, subject to valid existing rights. The boundary of the proposed withdrawal area also includes approximately 35,472.94 acres of non- Federal lands with no Federal interest, which would not be subject to the proposed withdrawal unless they are subsequently acquired by the Federal Government. The withdrawal is proposed for a period of 20 years to protect agricultural, ranching, wildlife, air quality, recreational, ecological, and scenic values in the Thompson Divide Area of Colorado. This notice segregates the land for 2 years from all forms of entry, appropriation, and disposal under the public land laws; location, entry, and patent under the mining laws; and operation of the mineral leasing, mineral materials, and geothermal leasing laws, subject to valid existing rights, and initiates a 90-day public comment period on the proposed withdrawal. A public meeting will be held on Dec. 14, 2022, from 5-7 p.m. at the Carbondale & Rural Fire Protection District, 300 Meadowood Drive, Carbondale, CO 81623. A virtual option will be available.

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

Eagle Rock Shelter – Status Update

The oldest known human occupation site in Colorado, Eagle Rock Shelter, has piqued the curiosity of locals and visitors alike. In 2019, after several years of methodical excavation by professional archaeologists, the excavation concluded, and the site was backfilled to close the excavation pits. The site is well known locally and receives substantial public visitation. This year BLM funded a contract for the initial interpretive design at the site. The interpretive contractor, History Associates, Inc., held in-person and virtual meetings this spring with various stakeholders, including representatives of the Ute Tribes, to help determine the path forward for the interpretation of the site. BLM will highlight items from the initial interpretive plan at the December RAC.

Cottonwood Days Education Program – Status Update

After a couple of years of being disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Gunnison Gorge NCA and Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) were once again able to conduct this signature in-person educational event in September and October this year. Other critical partners include CPW, Gunnison Gorge Anglers (TU), and the Ute Indian Museum. About 400 sixth grade students from Delta County and Olathe attended learning sessions along the scenic Gunnison River within Gunnison Gorge NCA. Learning focused on the cultural importance of the river corridor, water use and conservation, fish of the Gunnison River, aquatic invertebrates and the importance of water quality, and how artificial flies imitate the various aquatic species.

Education and Interpretive Support – Status Update

GGNCA hired a seasonal interpretive Park Ranger for the first time this year. The position works with CCA and BLM staff to support educational programming across all three of Colorado's National Conservation Areas. The position enabled a consistent BLM presence at all educational events in McInnis Canyons, Dominguez-Escalante, and Gunnison Gorge NCAs. Hundreds of contact hours were spent with students from a true cross section of our local communities, and included 11 river trips totaling 17 days, as well as 16 days of land-based learning.

Cross-cutting

Uncompahgre Field Office Resource Management Plan Amendment – Status Update

The UFO Approved Resource Management Plan (ARMP) was signed in April 2020. In late 2020, BLM received three lawsuits on the ARMP: one from the State of Colorado, one from Western Slope Conservation Center (WSCC), and one from Citizens for a Healthy Community (CHC). In spring 2021, plaintiffs' counsel and the Department of Justice initiated settlement conversations. In spring of 2022 BLM entered into a settlement agreement with the State of Colorado in which BLM agreed to initiate two statewide planning efforts: one for big game and one for Gunnison sage-grouse. Those planning efforts are currently underway. In August 2022 settlement agreements were finalized with CHC and WSCC. The agreements stipulate that the BLM will additionally initiate a UFO RMP Amendment within 60 days of the Notice of Availability of the statewide Draft RMP Amendment for Gunnison sage-grouse, or big game, whichever comes later. The RMP Amendment must be an EIS and will include an alternative that has more acres subject to No Leasing for oil and gas as compared to the most conservative alternative (Alt. B.1). The RMPA must also reconsider ACECs previously considered under Alternative B.1, and management of lands with wilderness characteristics previously analyzed in the Proposed RMP (PRMP).